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Draft report

Addendum

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IV. Review of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001: Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services

Introduction and overview

1. In paragraph 34 of resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, on the pattern of conferences, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Assembly at its fifty-third session a report on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services.

2. In paragraph 33 of the same resolution, the General Assembly took note of paragraph 62 of the report of the Committee on Conferences to the Assembly at its fifty-third session.[1] That paragraph recorded that, during the discussion by the Committee at its substantive session of 1998 of an item on improved coordination of conference services, it was stated, on the basis of information provided by representatives of the Secretariat during informal consultations, that no further budget reductions could be borne by conference services at the United Nations offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi.

3. At its 422nd and 423rd meetings, on 1 September 1999, the Committee considered the programme narrative on General Assembly affairs and conference services of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001 (A/54/6 (sect. 2)) and the report of the Secretary-General on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services (A/53/833).

4. The overall level of resources proposed for the biennium 2000–2001 reflected a net reduction in resources of 0.8 per cent, as compared to the revised appropriation for the biennium 1998–1999. The reduction would be achieved through various cost-saving measures currently in place, including improved management of resources budgeted for

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temporary assistance for meetings, increased capacity utilization, introduction of computer-assisted translation and the application of new technologies in the documentation and publishing services.

Discussion

5. Concern was expressed that, despite the efforts being made by the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, the cost savings mandated by Member States had resulted in a deterioration in the quality of the Department's output, in particular in the areas of translation and the timely issuance of documentation. The question was raised as to whether further budget reductions were compatible with enhanced productivity and quality of output. It was considered that the Committee should request the Secretary-General to provide more specific data on the impact of anticipated gains in productivity, notably through the introduction of new technologies, on the need for temporary assistance. The view was also expressed that, while the translation service offered significant potential for savings, the grade structure for its staff must be such as to ensure effective quality control.

6. Regret was expressed that the current format of the proposed programme budget did not allow for the budget proposals for conference services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi to be considered by the Committee. It was also noted that extrabudgetary funding for conference service staff at that Office far exceeded the level of funding from the regular budget. It was emphasized that the United Nations Office at Nairobi should be given equal treatment with other United Nations offices, including full conference services. It was further suggested that conference services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi be integrated into the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services.

7. The representative of the Secretariat explained that, unlike at United Nations Headquarters, Geneva and Vienna, conference services at Nairobi came under the budget heading of administration. It was confirmed that the greater part of the Office's resources were derived from extrabudgetary sources, and in particular from reimbursements from the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Commission on Human Settlements.

8. The view was expressed that the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000–2001 for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services was not adequate to remedy the qualitative and quantitative deficiencies in the provision of conference services and that the Committee should recommend that the General Assembly give careful consideration to the proposed programme budget.

9. It was suggested that the Committee should call for the implementation of the recommendation by the Office of Internal Oversight Services contained in paragraph 155 of the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of that Office (A/51/810).

10. The view was expressed that the Committee should emphasize that the conclusion contained in the report of the Secretary-General on the possibility of establishing a permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, that "supply does not necessarily create demand" (A/54/262, para. 7), was contradicted by data on the utilization rate for interpretation services provided at the United Nations Office at Vienna.

11. The view was also expressed that the Committee should emphasize that an increase in the use of temporary assistance and contractual translation services increased the need for revision at the senior levels.

12. It was suggested that the Committee should recommend that the General Assembly examine the possibility of establishing a minimal viable permanent interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Vienna, taking into account its cost effectiveness.

13. Replying to questions raised, the representative of the Secretariat pointed out that the proposed programme budget for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for the biennium 2000–2001 formed part of the Secretary-General's overall budget proposals and was therefore subject to the same policy decisions regarding staffing levels and financial ceiling. The slight reduction in the allocation sought for the biennium 2000–2001 over the previous biennium should not cause any reduction in the quality or quantity of the Department's output. Indeed, much of the reduction would be offset by efficiency gains from the enhanced utilization of new technology. The reduction in funding for temporary assistance would be mitigated in part by improved management capacity and greater reliance on locally recruited freelance staff. In addition, off-site reporting was being introduced in the production of verbatim records. Conference services hoped to address remaining inadequacies through the further use of technology and adjustments to resource allocations.

Conclusions and recommendations

14. The Committee took note of the report of the Secretary-General on the impact of economy measures on the delivery of mandated conference services (A/53/833).

15. The Committee recommended that the lessons deduced from the above-mentioned report of the Secretary-General should be taken into account when the proposed programme budget for the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services for the biennium 2000–2001 (A/54/6 (sect. 2)) was considered by the Fifth Committee.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-third Session, Supplement No. 32* and corrigendum (A/53/52 and Corr.1).